

LA PORTE COUNTY FAMILY COURT PROJECT

Basic Information

Population: 110,106

County Seat: La Porte

Judicial Officers: 8

Project Implementation: January 2002

Project Judge: Judge Robert Gilmore, Jr

Family Court personnel: To implement the Family Court Project, the full-time Director of Juvenile Court Services position was partially redesignated to create a Family Court Coordinator position. The Circuit Court also redesignated a portion of another employee's time each week to conduct family court record searches. The Project hired a new, part-time Family Court Case Manager position at \$15,000 per year.

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Funding

Family Court Project Funding:

\$65,000 (\$32,500 per year, for two-year period, from January 2002 through December 2003

\$12,000 in 2004

\$10,000 in 2005

Court Improvement Project Funding:

\$19,900 in 1992 (primarily for Quest case management technology)

\$31,300 in 2005 (Family Court information sharing and CHINS facilitation)

Family Court Mission Statement

The mission of the La Porte Family Court is to improve the lives of children and families throughout La Porte County by allowing the courts to use coordinated information to achieve consistent court orders, the involvement of appropriate services, and more family involvement in the ultimate resolution of matters pertaining to children.

Family Court Programming

Coordination of Multiple Case Families

The La Porte County project implemented the *information sharing between multiple courts* model, which it refers to as *case tracking*. A family's multiple cases may include all types of civil or criminal cases, but at least one of the multiple cases must involve a child-related issue to be eligible for Family Court.

Upon receipt of a referral to Family Court, the case manager researches court records to determine the status of the family's multiple cases, and then makes a recommendation about whether family court processing is needed. When the judge accepts a recommendation for

Family Court, an order is issued assigning the cases to Family Court. Notice of the assignment and the list of case numbers are sent to the parties and to all the courts involved in the family's multiple cases. Generally, all of the cases remain in their original courts. A monthly report is generated that reflects basic information about the Family Court cases pending in the judicial system. Each judge receives a copy of this report with his/her cases highlighted.

Approximately one week before a hearing is involving a family court family is scheduled, the judge receives a copy of a family court case management report, which contains a detailed description of pending matters related to all family members. If the judge elects to review this document, the judge makes copies of the report and submits them to the parties. Copies of the significant orders in each of the family's multiple case are maintained in the Family Court file, which is located at the La Porte Circuit Court for easy access when requested by a court or parties.

Initially, the multiple case families were identified from the CHINS caseload, and the Juvenile Magistrate and the Circuit Court Judge were the primary users of the case coordination programming. The monthly Family Court reports and case management reports have gained significant acceptance, however, and now all eight judicial officers utilize some portion of these reports. The reports are increasingly used in child custody cases, criminal sentencing, and additional juvenile matters.

Beginning in 2005, La Porte County began to use *case bundling* as another form of case management in multiple case families. Case assignments were changed to encourage greater coordination and information-gathering for multiple case families. When a CHINS family member in Magistrate Ankony's court also has a divorce, paternity, or guardianship case, a Family Court case will be opened. Parties will be given notice of and the opportunity to object to Family Court processing. If a divorce, paternity, or guardianship case is already in the Circuit court, that case will be bundled to Magistrate Ankony, but there will be no cause number change and no official case transfer. When the divorce, paternity, or guardianship case is from the Superior Court, notice will be given and the Superior Court will transfer the case. The transferred-in case will be assigned a new Circuit Court number and will not be returned to the court of origin.

Family Focused Case Management Report In School and Delinquency Matters **Streamlined Family Court Case Tracking Reports**

A streamlined (i.e. minimized) Family Court case tracking report is provided to the School Judge for all school-related offenses to provide the School Judge (and often the schools) valuable information about a family's involvement with the justice system, especially the criminal justice system. This information has enabled the School Judge and the schools to more prudently address a family's issues. This procedure has been implemented for use in all juvenile delinquency matters and by the SHOCAP screening team. To date, 240 streamlined reports have been presented to the School Judge/Juvenile Magistrate and/or the SHOCAP screening team.

Judicial Assistance

The La Porte pilot project has a Judicial Assistance program to help judicial officers link families to necessary services. This is particularly helpful in custody cases involving indigent, at-risk

families who are not otherwise eligible for services through the Office of Family and Children or other service providers. This program may include case monitoring and expedited hearings to ensure order compliance. This service has been provided for fifty-two families so far.

Alternative Dispute Resolution

The pilot project also developed non-adversarial dispute resolution programming referred to as "facilitation." The process is designed to give family members more input into the plans and services affecting their family. The Family Court coordinator serves as a neutral party who conducts a facilitation meeting one hour prior to the scheduled CHINS Initial Hearing. Parties, attorneys, case managers, service providers, CASAs, extended family members, close friends, and occasionally the child him/herself, participate in the discussion. It is less formal than a courtroom setting and the family members are empowered to "speak up" to tell the case managers and service providers what is really going on with their family. The facilitation process also is used at the permanency planning stage of the CHINS case. A permanency planning meeting is held at the Office of Family and Children several days prior to the scheduled Permanency Hearing. This non-adversarial process has enabled the court to streamline the Permanency Hearing; the facilitation often results in an agreed permanency plan and the parties are able to file the necessary guardianship, change of custody or other documents necessary to implement the permanency plan prior to the Permanency Hearing.

While facilitation began in CHINS proceedings, the facilitation process also has been used in divorce and paternity cases referred by the court. La Porte County Family Court anticipates expanding these services through an ADR plan approved by the Judicial Conference of the State of Indiana.

Families Served in La Porte County

The La Porte Project was implemented January 2002. As of July 2005, La Porte has served 188 families (not including those families who have only received facilitation without a Family Court case being opened) involving 1387 cases. 297 facilitation meetings have been conducted in CHINS cases.